

[By Donna Cassata](#)

Intent on sparing the Pentagon from deep spending cuts, top Senate Republicans on Thursday endorsed legislation that targets federal workers, reducing their ranks and freezing their salaries, to avoid the pain of automatic cuts for one year.

The White House and Democrats swiftly rejected the piecemeal approach, arguing that President Barack Obama and congressional Republicans backed the long-term, deficit-cutting plan last August and can't suddenly abandon it when faced with the dire consequences.

Sen. Jon Kyl, the No. 2 Senate Republican, and John McCain, the top GOP lawmaker on the Armed Services Committee, unveiled legislation to offset the automatic, across-the-board cuts scheduled to kick in next January. Their measure would extend the pay freeze for federal employees and reduce the workforce by 5 percent by limiting hiring to two employees for every three who leave.

The Arizona senators, joined by Armed Services members Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said the proposal would replace about \$110 billion in cuts. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., also embraced the plan.

"The prudent path forward would be to replace all of the across-the-board cuts with an equal amount of responsible savings," the senators said. "As Congress considers funding for the next fiscal year, we should at least be able to agree to one year in targeted spending reductions, instead of the draconian, across-the-board cuts resulting from sequestration."

Ayotte said she hoped the commander in chief would work with the lawmakers on the proposal.

The Pentagon is dealing with a reduction in projected defense spending of \$487 billion over 10 years based on the deficit-cutting plan that Obama and Republicans backed last summer. The failure of the so-called supercommittee to come up with at least \$1.2 trillion in cuts last

November will trigger another round of cuts in January 2013 in defense and domestic spending, with the Pentagon facing an additional \$492 billion reduction over a decade.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and the military chiefs have said such added cuts would be catastrophic. Republicans on the House and Senate Armed Services committees are trying to at least protect the military but face stiff opposition from Democrats. Obama has vowed to veto any attempt to undo the legislation.

"It can't be that some members of Congress promised to their constituents, promised to America in the Budget Control Act, 'Look at what we've done, we're holding our own feet to the fire, my fellow Americans.' And then a few months later decide, 'We really didn't mean it, let's change it,'" said White House spokesman Jay Carney.

In a letter to Obama, 127 House Democrats wrote that the automatic cuts should not be repealed or changed unless Congress comes up with a sweeping deficit-cutting plan of at least \$1.2 trillion.

"The failure of Congress to act must have consequences," said the lawmakers, led by Reps. Peter Welch, D-Vt., and George Miller, D-Calif. They promised to sustain any presidential veto.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said Republicans backed the deficit-cutting plan knowing what would happen if the supercommittee failed.

"Now you are really talking skullduggery," Pelosi said of the proposed legislation. "A commitment was made, an agreement was reached and I think it is wrong for them to say we're just not going to honor the commitment."

The chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., has introduced a similar bill to stave off the defense cuts and he welcomed the Senate GOP effort.

"No one believes this is a perfect or final solution, but it is a realistic one," he said. "It keeps our national security structure whole through a very political year, giving our military the certainty they need."

But the top Democrat on his panel, Rep. Adam Smith of Washington state, dismissed the idea of a short-term approach.

"Let's work toward a comprehensive and far-reaching deal that actually addresses our underlying budget problems," Smith said, arguing that it "would be far better for our country in the long run, ensuring national security and fostering economic growth."

The co-chair of the supercommittee, Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., said if Republicans are serious about replacing the automatic cuts, they should work with Democrats on finding the necessary savings without hurting the middle class.